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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUEBEC 000101

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SUBJECT: PARTI QUEBECOIS CONGRESS: ROADMAP TO SOVEREIGNTY, MAYBE

REF: Quebec 91

CLASSIFIED BY: Abigail Friedman, Consul General, Quebec City, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

1. (c) Summary: A coalition of widely varying political ideologies, the Parti Quebecois (PQ) is united in the goal of sovereignty but divided on how to achieve this. The Party's "hard core" stresses Quebec's francophone identity and wants a declaration of independence immediately after victory at the polls. The moderates judge that such victory will not come unless the Party embraces a gradualist route to sovereignty and makes concessions to Quebec's multi-ethnic society. The party's June 3-5 convention (its first in five years), reflected factional differences but also demonstrated that on key issues the moderate majority - which always has one eye on the voters -- is able to make its position stick. PQ delegates adopted a comprehensive, social democratic electoral platform, entitled "Project for a Country," which satisfies ideologues on a number of points, but on two key issues, sovereignty and language, the moderate majority stood its ground. The PQ hard core will want to use the November 15 leadership race to pull the party more in its direction. But that race is in the hands of the wider PQ membership that traditionally favor a candidate who can attract enough voters to bring electoral victory. All this suggests that the next PQ leader will likely face the same struggle that confronted Landry and all of his predecessors: keeping the party responsive to a pragmatic Quebec electorate over the machinations of a hardcore minority. The PQ may be hindered in achieving its objectives more by its internal inconsistencies than by the absence of a perfect leader. End Summary.

A Social Democratic Party

2. (c) At the PQ leadership convention June 3-5, its first in five years and the first since its electoral defeat in 2003, party delegates reached agreement on a document entitled "Project for a Country," which is, in effect, a revamped, renamed electoral platform. That document captures the party's vision of Quebec as:

- francophone, democratic, and pacifist;
- social-democratic, favoring solidarity and equality;
- strongly pro-union;
- favoring a high degree of state intervention;
- wary of globalization;
- committed to preserving and promoting Quebec's cultural and linguistic diversity;
- committed to sustainable development; and
- supportive of international organizations, such as the U.N.

3. (c) As newly named PQ Executive Council President Monique Richard put it to a television audience shortly after the party convention, the PQ is an "uneasy coalition of sovereigntists" with many factions and diverse positions. Sovereignty apart, the views of PQ members range from a fiscally conservative center-right to anti-globalization "greens," with the left-of-center predominating. The PQ consensus is firmly social democratic, although fringe positions also make their way into the party platform. (At the June convention, for example, party delegates came out in favor of lowering the voting age to sixteen and of inviting Quebecers to use paper instead of plastic bags at the supermarket.)

United Behind Sovereignty

4. (c) PQ caucus leader Agnes Maltais, who discussed the party platform with CG June 8, said that the "Project for a Country" is a communication tool, intended to drive home the point that sovereignty is at the top of the party's agenda. Maltais said that in the past, PQ platforms only stated in general terms the party's commitment to sovereignty, focusing instead on how a PQ government should run each ministry. The new document calls for the next PQ government to use public money to promote sovereignty and to adopt laws in preparation for sovereignty. Moreover, as the PQ's electoral platform and its Project for a Country are now one and the same, the platform commits the party to run its next provincial election campaign directly on the issue of sovereignty.

But Divided over Strategy

15. (c) Maltais acknowledged that re-orienting and renaming the party platform is a concession to the PQ hard core, who fear the party is more interested in winning elections than in bringing Quebec to sovereignty. But she stressed that the hard-core lost on the all-important issue of strategy to attain sovereignty. Convention delegates rejected the hard core bid to adopt a resolution calling on the PQ to declare an act of independence immediately after an election victory. Instead, the delegates supported the approach favored by former PQ leader Bernard Landry, which calls for a referendum "as soon as possible" after the next election.

16. (c) The hard core also lost on an amendment to the French Language Charter (Bill 101) that would have prevented francophones and immigrants from attending English CEGEPs (pre-university junior colleges). The hard core logic seems to be that when Quebec becomes a sovereign country it will have only French as its national language, given this, they argue against spending public funds on English-language education. More moderate delegates at the convention, sensitive to electoral considerations, spoke out against the amendment, underscoring the folly of taking a stance that gives the party a xenophobic, anti-diversity image at a time when it is working to expand support among the public. Ultimately, delegates adopted a much watered-down resolution to "remain vigilant given the regression of French among certain communities."

Hoping for Another Chance

17. (c) While PQ moderates came out of the convention with a social democratic platform to their liking, the hard core denied Bernard Landry the clear, overwhelming support he had hoped for, triggering his resignation halfway through the convention. (reftel.) The PQ hard core is now hoping the leadership race scheduled for November 15 will give them another crack at imposing its more radical agenda on the party. They can do this either by running a candidate who shares their views, or by promising their support to the candidate most willing to negotiate concessions to their liking. The former strategy is unlikely to succeed, as a hard core candidate has never garnered support from more than about a quarter of the party. Instead, political pundits expect the hard core will seek to expand the number of PQ members sympathetic to their cause (through a membership drive in advance of the leadership election) and to press candidates to reopen the question of when a referendum might be held.

18. (c) But a leadership election is far different from a vote of confidence. Unlike the eighty percent goal Landry set himself for his vote of confidence, a simple majority will decide the next PQ leader. And whereas a vote of confidence is decided by the roughly 1600 convention delegates, all 75,000 card-carrying members of the PQ are eligible to vote (and many expect this number to increase in advance of the November 15 leadership election.) With the hard core in a minority, the election process tends to favor a "popular" candidate who can appeal to the moderate majority of party members.

Comment: Deja vu All Over Again?

19. (c) Despite all the media chatter about the radicalization of the party with Landry's resignation, the above suggests that the next leader may well be -- like Landry and all of his predecessors -- a PQ moderate well aware of the need to win Quebecers over to the idea of sovereignty and respectful of the party's social democratic agenda. But as with Landry and all of his predecessors, the next leader will be faced with the same challenge of making the party responsive to a pragmatic public while fending off the demands of a militant hard core. Despite its internal inconsistencies, the party has managed to win elections before. The difference now is that the PQ sees itself as at a critical juncture in its history. With its new platform, the PQ is looking for a leader who can both win an election and move Quebec rapidly toward sovereignty. Whether there will be a candidate up to the task remains to be seen. But equally important, after the recent actions of the PQ hard core at the convention, is whether the Parti Quebecois itself is up to the task.

FRIEDMAN